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ABSTRACT

This paper reviews research on social competence in young children, outlining nine factors that influence the development of social competence. These are: (1) positive self-esteem; (2) a positive attitude; (3) active participation; (4) respect for others; (5) effective communication skills; (6) problem-solving ability; (7) an outgoing personality; (8) an ability to meet group and individual needs; and (9) a sense of optimism. Ten family factors were also found to have a significant influence on social competence, including a positive parent-child relationship, involvement of the child in family activities, respect of the child by family members, appropriate parental expectations, and a sense of spiritual or religious purpose. Finally, 12 school factors were identified as having an influence on social competence, including (1) appropriate teacher expectations; (2) respect for each child; (3) clear rules, (4) access to educational materials and activities, (5) cooperative and child-centered learning, (6) teaching of social skills, and (7) abundant social interaction. Includes 59 references. (MDM)

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# SOCIAL COMPETENCE NEEDS IN YOUNG CHILDREN: WHAT THE RESEARCH SAYS

Dorothy F. Tunstall, Ph.D.

After a lecture by the late Francis Wayland Parker, great Chicago educator, a woman asked:

"How early can I begin the education of my child?"

"When will your child be born?"

"Born," she gasped. "Why he is already five years old!"

"My goodness, woman," he cried, "don't stand there talking to me - hurry home; already you have lost the best five years." (from The Survey Graphic)

What is needed to develop children who will become socially independent, productive, and responsive citizens? (Pellicano, 1987, paraphrased). Those children who will not be drug dependent, violent, or irresponsible; who will instead be cooperative, friendly, respectful, loving and caring citizens? Social competence in young children is vital for producing such citizens.

What exactly is social competence? It is the skills needed to meet one's own needs as well as those of others in the group. It is the capacity to interact with people in a meaningful way (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Another way of saying this is to say that social competence is the child's capacity to interact effectively with his environment (White, 1959). According to Schaefer (1991), social competence is the cornerstone of school success.

There are some children who have personal attributes or factors that help them acquire social competence very easily. Such children may be called resilient, invincible, or hardy. They are the ones who can bounce back from obstacles and disappointments, can live in stark poverty but are unaffected, can grow up in an alcoholic family but don't

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become an alcoholic.

There are nine factors in young children that lead towards social competence that were found in reviewing the literature. All of the nine factors, of course, interact with family, school, and community.

Personal Attributes:

1. **Positive self-esteem** comes from research done by Comer, Haynes, Hamilton-Lee, Boger and Rollock (1987). A sense of liking oneself makes a firm foundation for all future proactive social competence.

2. A **positive attitude** comes from research by Lewis and Lawrence-Patterson (1989) and Wildstein and Thompson (1989). This attitude of self-confidence is more important in the long run than is self-competence. Being willing to try new things is essential for growth and learning.

3-5. **Being an active participator, being respectful of others,** and **effective communication skills** is supported by research done by Frymier (1977) with classroom teachers at the Annehurst School over several years. The Annehurst study developed procedures and concepts for assessing individual children's strengths and weaknesses. Actively participating with others gives feedback for behavior changes if needed. Being respectful of others is based on respecting one's own self first. In order to interact positively with others, communication skills are necessary. Faster adaptation occurs with better communication skills.

6. Bremm and Erickson (1977), Rutter (1984) and Spivak

and Shure (1974) showed the importance of **having problem-solving ability.** Social competence is boosted by being able to solve problems in alternative or creative ways that satisfy both self and group needs.

7. A **friendly, outgoing, cooperative personality** is useful for social competence. Such factors were always found in socially competent children (Frymier, 1977; Schaefer and Edgerton (1978).

8. An ability to **meet own needs as well as group needs** is another attribute of socially competent children. Research by Putallaz and Gottman (1981) as well as Ross and Rogers (1982) supports this.

9. Finally, a **sense of optimism** comes from research by Benard (1992) and Werner and Smith (1982). A sense of hope for the future gives children a sense of purpose. Flexibility and a sense of humor are also mentioned in this area.

Parents are the child's first teachers, whether they see themselves in that roll or not. Ten family factors were found to be significant based on the literature search. Children who find themselves in families that possess most of these attributes can be considered lucky or fortunate.

Family Attributes:

1. A **warm, supportive family environment** is essential for most children to develop social competence. This is discussed by Bradley, Caldwell and Rock (1990), Rohner (1986), and White (1985). This type of nurturing environment remains a critical factor throughout childhood. Every child

needs to fell safe, secure, and vulnerable.

2. **Positive parent-child relationships** over the years was shown by Lewis and Goldberg (1969), Mead (1934), Piaget (1976), and Watson (1972). A warm, loving, supportive family will make for positive parent-child interactions. Children should not be treated as possessions to be ordered around, either by parents or by other primary caregivers. "No" is not the word most heard by positive families. Instead such families try their best to set up an environment for the child that will allow them to be successful and to explore.

3. **Involvement of the child in family activities** was pointed out by Benard (1992) and Kurth-Schai (1988). Opportunities for active involvement prove to have powerful proactive affects on children. Such involvement helps children to become caring adults. Contributing to the welfare of the family helps children develop a sense of personal worth and competence, not to mention that it helps them develop responsibility and nurturance for others (Kurth-Schai, 1988).

4. **Strong bonding or attachment to primary parent or caregiver** is discussed at length by Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, and Wall (1978) as well as by Demos (1989) and Yarrow, Rubenstein, and Pedersen (1985). Such an attachment early in life seems essential for trusting others, a needed foundation for any positive future socialization. The book entitled <u>High Risk: Children Without a Conscience</u> by Magid and McKelvey (1987) brings this fact home in a frightening

way. They state that children who do not develop such an attachment bond early in life will become children without a conscience, children with antisocial personality disorders. Such children are said to be unattached and therefore unable to give and receive affection.

5. **Families with high self-esteem** was shown to be important by Baumrind (1967, 1971) and by Maccoby and Martin (1983). Liking others for their own worth makes for family unity and a feeling of togetherness. Such families tend to like themselves and each other.

6. The **child is special to family members** or valuing the child as special and respecting his/her as a person leads to treating the child as persons of worth. When each child is treated in this way, he/she is more likely to treat all others around them in the same way.

7. **Appropriate parental expectations** was pointed out by Clark (1983) and Williams and Kornblum (1985). If a child hears consistently that he/she can do well, he/she will internalize high expectations for himself/herself. This holds true even in disadvantaged places (Mills, 1990) and even helps the child to become more resilient (Haan, 1989). Each child needs goals in life and personal integrity.

8. **Positive parental modeling** is most important in promoting social competence in young children. It was found to be consistent with proactive behavior by Hartup and Moore (1990), Parke (1990), and Werner (1989). Actions speak louder than words! Children model what they see, whether it

be attitudes, words, or behaviors.

9. A **sense of spiritual or religious purpose** is also shown to be related to social competence by Anthony (1987) and Werner (1990). Children with a religious or spiritual purpose tend to possess hope for the future that all will turn out well.

10. Finally, the **child has access to many available resources** and its impact on social competence was shown by Isenberg (1988) and Tulkin (1977). An abundance of books and toys in the home, coupled with access to libraries, museums, zoos, plays, playgrounds, people of different cultures, etc., in the community help produce curious and willing learners.

If all families had most of the above attributes, it would not be necessary for schools to contribute very much to the social competence of young children. However, in today's world, caregivers and schools must contribute in helping all children. Schools can make up for what is lacking in the home. A closer school-home collaboration seems more and more essential as time passes.

What's left as the responsibility of the school to contribute to the social competence of the child? As a matter of fact, many of the same factors are needed as for in the home. Caregivers in schools need simply to carry over these needed factors. Twelve factors were considered important enough to be listed under schools in the review of literature.

School Attributes:

1. **High teacher expectations that are positive and appropriate** is one carry-over factor from the family (Edmonds, 1986; Rutter, 1979). "The prophesy of self-fulfillment" is alive and well in our schools today.

2. A **warm, caring school environment** is a second carry-over from family factors (Benard, Henderson, and Werner, all 1990). Children are allowed to make mistakes and learn from their mistakes.

3. **Respect for each child** is essential for schools (Lewin, Lippitt, and White, 1939). Showing respect for each child proves to each child he is special and a person of worth and valued. Only in this way can each child's cultural diversity be appreciated.

4. **Clear guidelines, rules, or regulations** are needed by children (Rutter, 1979; Garmezy, 1991). Never assume that children know the rules of the school simply because they are physically present. Rules need to be taught on the level of the child for understanding.

5. A **high level of involvement and participation** is the third carry-over from family factors (Benard, 1992; Linney and Seidman, 1989). Many schools, because of their size, find this difficult to enact today.

6. **Many and varied resources are made available by the school** is a fourth carry-over from family factors (Isenberg, 1988; Tulkin, 1977).

7. **Cooperative learning** has been shown over and over

again to be helpful in helping children develop social competence (Aronson, 1975; Johnson and Johnson, 1991). The interaction and helping atmosphere lends itself to interactions among all students.

8. **Child-centered learning** is the school's responsibility (Bredenkamp, (NAEYC), 1988; Putnam, 1986). Since the child is the learner, learning should be the responsibility of the child. Teachers and caregivers should evaluate curriculum constantly from the child's viewpoint to see if it really helps the child to learn.

9. Students need **some control over their own learning** (Sarason, 1990; Schweinhart, Weikart, and Larner, 1986). Giving students choices allows them to develop problem-solving ability.

10. An **emphasis on meaningful learning** goes hand in hand with the others above (Maton, 1990). Children seem to have a "sixth sense" for what will actually affect them in the future. Motivation becomes automatic when meaningful learning is considered.

11. **Schools may** also **teach social skills directly** (Felsman, 1989; Shure and Spivak, 1982). Doing this tends to help those children who have not acquired needed social skills and to understand why they are important.

12. **Lots of social interaction** in schools is another factor that leads to social competence (Benard, 1990). Children learn to adjust and adapt their skills according to feedback from peers and adults.

To be appropriate for the age of the child, social competence changes as the child matures physically, cognitively, and emotionally. Infant babies, birth to 1, need love, security, and stability. These are fostered by regular, consistent, and predictable care. Toddler children, ages 1-2, need independence and guidance. This is fostered by encouragement and choices for practicing new skills. Preschool children, ages 3-5, need responsibility. Responsibility can be fostered by self-initiated exploration and environmental discovery. This can be accomplished by role-playing, projects, and answering "why" questions. Elementary school children, age 6 and up, need success and a sense of competence. This can be fostered by exploring and practicing with tools. (Isenberg, 1988).

Businesses and communities who will be most successful with students will provide the same attributes as those for families and schools. The more factors that are the same as those listed above, the more successful businesses and communities will be with school children. Any experiences within families, schools, and communities that lead to the acquisition of the personal factors listed above would also be useful to provide.

Social isolates and children with behavior problems are definite signs for teachers to intervene. Common sense dictates early intervention. The skills needed for social competence can be taught. And if you happen to teach at-risk children, educators can be the life-line they need, making up

for the parents that lack so much.

We as advocates for young children want to raise each child as one who "works well, plays well, loves well, and expects well" (Garmezy, 1974; Werner and Smith, 1982). If our aim is to have a caring nation, then our main mission must be to create caring children. This is not a job for the faint of heart or the lazy.

You are at this conference today because you have hope for our children's future. Hope is a dimension of the soul. And it is this same hope that will give us the motivation and strength to do our very best to instill social competence in the youngsters in our care. Never forget that each of us has the ability to touch a child for the better. Good luck to you in your quest!

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